

Introduction to the special issue: why the coronavirus crisis is also a crisis of leadership

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Abstract

This editorial introduction argues that the coronavirus crisis is also a crisis of leadership theory and practice. Decision making is particularly hazardous when we have poor evidence to guide us and face unpredictable outcomes. Mainstream leadership theories are of little help, since an environment of radical uncertainty means that leaders have less information, expertise and resources to guide them than is often assumed. Undaunted, populist leaders exploit uncertainty to suggest that simple solutions will work. I suggest that the responses of such leaders have been characterised by *incompetent* leadership, *denialist* leadership, *panic* leadership, *othering* leadership and *authoritarian* leadership. I also consider the implications of the crisis for business leadership, suggesting that already strained relationships within organisations are likely to deteriorate still further. Critical leadership studies has an important contribution to make in challenging self-serving theories of business that have come to guide much leadership decision-making. We have an opportunity to do research that really matters, and participate in vital conversations about how the theory and practice of leadership can contribute to better outcomes from the coronavirus crisis, and others still to come.

Keywords

Populism, leadership decision-making, critical leadership studies

Introduction

The coronavirus crisis is unprecedented. It is the first pandemic to strike with such virulence in modern times, when the world is more interconnected than any other time in history. It is

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extraordinary that a virus which began in Wuhan, probably in December 2019, could within three months sweep the world, bringing misery to millions and shuttering much of the global economy. While this is primarily a public health crisis, it is also an economic, social and political crisis. Its effects will be felt for many years to come.

Of course, plagues and diseases have afflicted humans throughout history, along with panicky responses, institutional failures, and stories of courage, wisdom and redemption. There is much here that is familiar. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977: 195–196) analyses measures taken to contain plague within a French town in the 17th century. His account, drawing on contemporary documents, resembles what we now call ‘lockdowns’:

On the appointed day, everyone is ordered to stay indoors. If it is absolutely necessary to leave the house, it will be done in turn, avoiding any meeting... ‘A considerable body of militia, commanded by good officers and men of substance’, guards at the gates, at the town hall and in every quarter to ensure the prompt obedience of the people and the most absolute authority of the magistrates, ‘as also to observe all disorder, theft and extortion’.

But the scale of this particular crisis means that politicians, health service leaders and University chiefs are among those now being tested as few of them could have anticipated. This means that the coronavirus crisis is also a crisis of leadership. Firstly, it is a crisis of leadership practice. How are key decision makers performing, and what leadership systems, relationships and dynamics are producing good and bad results? Secondly, I suggest that it is a crisis of leadership theory. To what extent can leadership theories help us understand what is happening? Perhaps more importantly, to what extent can they point to approaches that leaders should adopt if they are to secure more positive than negative outcomes? These are among the questions that dominate this issue of *Leadership*.

Here, I approach them by considering the dilemmas that leaders face when confronted with evidence of an impending crisis. Most analysis of a crisis has the benefit of hindsight. Events seem more inevitable than they did when they occurred. But leadership takes place in an environment of radical uncertainty. We need to consider the consequences of this for political leadership, and particularly its effects on the rise of populist leadership. In addition, we have so far had little discussion about the implications of the crisis for business leadership. In addressing that issue, I flag the (ir)relevance of most leadership theories to the challenges that lie ahead, and suggest that the coronavirus crisis again shows the need for our scholarship to be more relevant, address big issues and become less introspective.

Nature of crisis

As Bert Spector argues in this issue, whether something is a crisis, and what should be done about it, is inevitably the subject of contestation between multiple options, and groups with differentiated interests and unequal access to information and decision-making power. This is particularly the case when the nature of the presenting crisis is ambiguous. Kay and King (2020) distinguish between what they term puzzles and mysteries, in terms that chime with Keith Grint’s discussion of tame, critical and wicked problems (this issue). They write:

A puzzle has well-defined rules and a single solution, and we know when we have reached that solution. Puzzles deliver the satisfaction of a clear-cut task and a correct answer. Even when you can’t find the right answer, you know it exists... Mysteries offer no such clarity of definition,

and no objectively correct solution...they are imbued with vagueness and indeterminacy...A mystery cannot be solved as a crossword puzzle can: it can only be framed, by identifying the critical factors and applying some sense of how these factors have interacted in the past and might interact in the present or the future (p. 21).

These distinctions are not watertight. The coronavirus crisis bears some resemblance to a puzzle. The possibility of a pandemic has been high on all risk registers for many years. The puzzle, here, is: what preparations do we need to have in place for a pandemic? This suggests that, at a minimum, Governments (including within the UK) had enough information to, for example, ensure that front line health workers had better access to personal protection equipment (PPE).

But this crisis also has elements of mystery, which hampers decision making. Even when it was at an advanced stage little reliable information was available about how many people had been infected or what the fatality rate of Covid-19 is. The Stanford epidemiologist John Ioannidis (2020) has described this as an 'evidence fiasco'. There were also high levels of uncertainty about its economic consequences, and what impact repeated taserings of the world economy would have on public health. Crucial decisions were being made in conditions of what Kay and King would describe as 'radical uncertainty'.

Leaders are often caught between fire and sword. If they act quickly and prevent a health disaster, they risk being accused of exaggerating the threat. The threat becomes hypothetical while the pain is actual. Moreover, if the crisis is sufficiently contained or avoided altogether, gains may never become evident. Preventative action can be readily seen as an attack on people's jobs and their livelihoods – for nothing. Yet if they delay until the crisis is fully developed leaders are likely to be accused of complacency, inaction and responsibility for the deaths of perhaps millions of people.

Recall, for example the 'Y2K' problem, where it was feared that many computers wouldn't be able to cope with the transition to a new millennium and would crash, with catastrophic consequences. The general view now is that nothing much happened, and that the money spent on averting it was wasted. As a result, the millennium bug crisis/scare is still regularly wheeled out to criticise predictions of an impending crisis. It is less well known that 15 nuclear reactors shut down, that there were power cuts in Hawaii, and some Government computers failed in China and Hong Kong (Thomas, 2019). Preventative measures ensured that there weren't many more such examples.

Retrospective analysis of policy failures in a crisis are hampered by what Nutt (2002) describes as 'hindsight biases'. Many decisions fail, sometimes disastrously – for example the decision to launch the Challenger space shuttle in January 1986. It exploded 73 seconds into its launch, killing all seven crew members on board. Senior NASA managers were vilified for deciding to launch. The problem is that post-crisis narratives focus on what by then is known to have triggered the disaster, and we think these factors should have been equally salient to decision makers at the time (Vaughan, 1996). The difference is that the elements of uncertainty when decisions were made are removed from retrospective evaluations of its effectiveness.

The coronavirus crisis has revealed that these problems with leaders' decision-making have become more intense. As systems grow more complex and inter-connected, the prospect of failure increases. This is particularly the case when they are tightly coupled – that is, when the failure of one part of the system endangers the functioning of the system as a whole. This ensures that one or two malfunctions can 'cause a cascade of failures' (Clearfield

and Tilcsik, 2018: 27). Think nuclear power stations, airplanes in flight and drilling for oil in deep seas. But globalisation has made the entire world economy more complex, with much of it tightly coupled. This renders it even more difficult to anticipate the impact of a crisis. The global travel that we have taken for granted clearly helped the coronavirus spread at a frightening speed from Wuhan to the rest of the world. Thus, there will be multiple unintended consequences from any course of action, or inaction. Uncertainty is high, but decisions still have to be made.

The ambiguity of evidence

This points to the ambiguity of evidence, which is always only partial. As I write this article, the media is reporting the leak of a Cabinet Office report, the National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA), delivered to the UK Government in December 2019.¹ The report ran to over 600 pages, listed dozens of threats, and identified the possibility of an influenza style pandemic as its top concern. Yet when the coronavirus crisis struck it emerged that the UK was woefully ill equipped with PPE for health workers, despite the report recommending that action should be taken to increase stocks. This is an open and shut case of negligence, complacency and bureaucratic bungling.

Or is it? From a leadership perspective, it is useful to think here of *general preparations* for a crisis and *specific and immediate actions* when its nature is insufficiently clear or immediate. Given that the likelihood of a pandemic had long been foretold, it seems evident that general preparation should have mandated more action on such fronts as stockpiles of PPE. But consider precisely the fact that a pandemic had been anticipated for many years. When a long anticipated crisis fails to materialise (e.g. ‘one day, this volcano will erupt’) fatigue inevitably sets in, and preparations slip.

In Britain, the NSRA report arrived when the UK Government was absorbed by the challenges of Brexit. Its bandwidth for dealing with anything else was limited. This is not to excuse culpability. Rather, it is to identify the stressed conditions under which important decisions are taken. Brexit is an entirely self-inflicted strain on the UK’s system of government. But even if it did not monopolise the attention spans of key decision makers when the coronavirus struck, other issues would have done so. I suggest that all *warnings of impending crisis occur in already noisy environments*: that is, there will be multiple potential crises competing for attention. Leaders may be tempted to reassure themselves that perhaps the worst case scenario will be nothing more than another Y2K bug.

They also face ambiguities in any warnings that they receive, carefully excised from tabloid media accounts that favour black and white narratives of heroes and villains. The NSRA report is written in probabilistic language, with many ‘likelies’, ‘possibles’ and ‘maybes’ scattered through its text. This is good science. But, in terms of *specific and immediate actions*, it doesn’t help to narrow the range of policy options from which leaders must choose.

Even where more complete evidence is assembled this doesn’t mean that it points unambiguously towards a clear course of action (Tourish, 2013). For example, a study of health prioritisation in New Zealand during the 1990s explored how different government agencies all gathered evidence on the issue, driven by the conviction that policy should be informed by better evidence, but then reached different policy conclusions (Tenbensel, 2004). Tetlock’s (2005) work on decision making shows that experts themselves often disagree strongly on key policy issues, and are inclined to error when assessing the severity of possible

threats. As Harford (2011: 8) puts it, any insights offered by experts ‘go only so far. The problem is not the experts: it is the world they inhabit . . . which is simply too complicated for anyone to analyse with much success.’

This poses challenges for both the theory and practice of leadership. In my view, mainstream leadership theories (transformational, authentic and so on) encourage leaders to concentrate ever more power in their own hands, and places impossible expectations on their ability to handle complex issues. Followers, in turn, often expect leaders to always know what should be done next, as if each wears a Superhero outfit underneath their business clothes. It is easy to imagine that leaders have more information, expertise and resources than they do. This might be fine if they are dealing with a puzzle. But such expectations fall apart when leaders are dealing with a mystery, and are operating in conditions of radical uncertainty. Ambiguous events lack obvious precedents, clear solutions and straightforward criteria for evaluation – in short, all the things that leaders and non-leaders seem to crave. We need more theories that explore how leaders can cope with radical uncertainty and make decisions where the margin of error is high and the consequences of failure potentially catastrophic.

In terms of leadership practice, the coronavirus crisis has generated different responses. Suze Wilson considers in this issue how New Zealand’s prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, rose more successfully than most to the challenge. Donna Ladkin looks at a polar opposite response – that of Donald Trump. Leah Tomkins explores the more general issue of how visible leaders need to be in a crisis, with a particular emphasis on the UK’s Boris Johnson, while Ajnesh Prasad looks at the populist leadership of Narendra Modi in India. Here, I wish to suggest that populist leaders are particularly unsuited to dealing with radical uncertainty. As the coronavirus crisis eventually recedes, I suggest that the boost that it has given to populist leadership may well linger.

Populist leadership

Populism, of the left or right, paints a story of ‘the people’ against elites, ‘in the name of popular sovereignty and ‘defending democracy’ (Moffitt, 2016: 1). It rejects pluralism in favour of foregrounding sectional interests (class, race or nation) (Werner Müller, 2016). Populist leadership thrives in crises, but despite this is particularly ill-equipped to deal with them. I draw here on the work of Benjamin Moffatt to look at these issues.

Moffitt (2015) identifies six ways in which populist leaders seek to exploit a crisis. These are:

1. *Identify failure.* This failure can be real, imaginary or pending. But it must be presented as a matter of existential urgency that requires rapid action.
2. *Elevate the level of this crisis by linking it to a wider narrative of decay and add a temporal dimension.* A number of issues are presented as being somehow related and sharing a common source. For example, it can be argued that stresses on the health service, housing, unemployment and even traffic problems are all caused by immigration.² In addition, the present moment is portrayed as a uniquely unfavourable combination of crises that threaten ‘our way of life’.
3. *Frame the crisis in terms of ‘the people’ vs. those responsible for the crisis.* Positive in-groups are contrasted with demonised out-groups who become ‘Enemies of the people’.

4. *Use the media to propagate performance.* Stage dramatic events, stunts and provocative press conferences. Violate established norms of behaviour, and bask in the resultant controversy.
5. *Present simple solutions and advocate strong leadership.* Examples of simple solutions abound: build a wall between Mexico and the US, leave the European Union, throw out foreigners and stop funding the World Health Organization. All problems are puzzles rather than mysteries. There is no uncertainty at all about what needs to be done. Despite this, only a 'strong leader' is uniquely qualified to take the steps that are necessary to save us.
6. *Continue to propagate crisis.* Even if a current crisis is successfully addressed, the dark forces that brought it about are still there, conspiring to cause further ones in the future.

Moffitt (2015: 198) suggests that what he calls 'the performance of crisis' is 'an internal core feature of populism'. It denigrates evidence and appeals to emotions, particularly fear. This can be reassuring, at least initially. Using Homer's story of Odysseus, and Kafka's imaginative retelling of it in 1917, Yiannis Gabriel's contribution in this issue shows that humans have an ancient predisposition to be seduced by Siren voices, despite the threat of ruination that they bring. Many of what we can think of as the Siren performance tropes of populism are already in evidence in responses to the coronavirus crisis. More of them may come into play as its economic consequences gather force. In particular, Goethals (2018: 513) has argued

The populism of Donald Trump and his supporters can be viewed as rooted in feelings of relative deprivation, whereby people feel that they are getting less than they deserve in exchanges with other groups, and perceptions of unfair procedures, whereby elites are seen to allocate outcomes in an unethical, biased, and/or disrespectful manner.

This offers an insight into the appeal of populism beyond the US. Economic crises always affect societies unequally, and vastly unequal societies all the more. Rising unemployment, stalling wages, and insecure employment caused by the coronavirus crisis will reinforce feelings of 'relative deprivation'. It may well be, therefore, that this crisis will intensify those trends that were evident before it began, when populist leadership had already gained ground in many countries (Haass, 2020).

Resisting the spirit of dichotomisation that pervades leadership studies (Collinson, 2017), we are unlikely to see a 'pure' form of populism that can be contrasted with unsullied exemplars of positive leadership. Any social phenomenon rarely exhibits all of its defining characteristics equally. Nevertheless, I think that we can identify five strains of populist leadership that have been evident in this crisis, and which may well intensify:

1. *Incompetent leadership:* A distrust of 'experts' is hardwired into any narrative that prioritises emotion over evidence. We have therefore witnessed a lack of preparation and the dispensing of much quack advice. For example, the President of Madagascar claimed that herbal tea could cure the coronavirus within seven days. Long queues immediately formed to buy bottles of this magic medicine.
2. *Denialist leadership:* A populist leader already in power can't argue that if only a strong leader were appointed all would be well. This would mean that they have become a humble narcissist. Having previously claimed that non-existent or small threats were a

crisis, they therefore now claim that a real crisis doesn't exist. Thus, Trump suggested at an early stage that 'We have it totally under control'. The UK Government claimed that 'The UK is well prepared for disease outbreaks', even as health workers faced shortages of vital equipment. But such leaders also fear the derailing of other populist bandwagons they have set in motion. Denialist leadership can therefore extend to under-estimating the full effects of the crisis, even when it is admitted. In the UK, the Johnson Government has been reluctant to concede that its Brexit timetable will be affected. More seriously still, Donald Trump has encouraged those protesting that a lockdown is akin to fascism and who echo his view that the economy should be rapidly reopened.

3. *Panic leadership*: A sudden realisation develops that some expertise is required after all, since populist leadership can't actually deal with the crisis that we face. Viruses are immune to rhetoric and emotion, and no wall has yet been built that keeps them out. Previously demonised experts are thus wheeled out to provide authoritative assessments of the nature of the crisis, and justify crisis measures that have suddenly become necessary. A narrative that 'we relied on the science' also offers an insurance policy against criticism in the future: 'We were misled by experts'.
4. *Othering leadership*: Here, we see populist leadership in full flow, where scapegoats become the target of vilification, blame and punitive action. Trump, once more, epitomises this trend, describing the coronavirus as 'the Chinese virus', and halting applications for Green Cards for sixty days. In this issue, Donna Ladkin's contribution explores Trump's role in more detail, while Ash Prasad cites alarming chapter and verse in India.
5. *Authoritarian leadership*: A strong leader needs ever greater powers to deal with the crisis, to eliminate those restraints on authority that are allegedly preventing effective action. One instance: the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, had Parliament vote to 'cancel all elections, suspend its own ability to legislate, and give the prime minister the right to rule by decree - indefinitely' (Applebaum, 2020). Opponents of this action have been denounced for trying to spread the virus, and accused of not valuing Hungarian lives.

Greater leader power also implies a need for more surveillance, to ensure that the leader's edicts are being obeyed and that enemies of the people can be speedily unmasked. We were becoming 'a surveillance society' even before this crisis (Adler-Bell and Miller, 2018). There is a clear and present danger that authoritarian and populist regimes may use the coronavirus crisis 'to normalize oppressive surveillance measures, perhaps making them seem more palatable or even necessary as insurance against unknown future contagions or threats' (French and Monahan, 2020: 6). It is notable that Foucault's description of a 'lockdown' in 17th century France is precisely what led him to develop his influential metaphor of the panopticon, depicting a system of total surveillance where people could never be absolutely sure if they were being observed or not. The Chinese Government is already employing some of the technology it used to deal with it to extend its control of the Chinese population (Ko, 2020). Where such regimes lead, others will certainly be tempted to follow.

A further paradox of populist leadership is that while it promises to solve all our problems it merely compounds those that already exist, and generates more to keep them company. Many of our problems require global cooperation. But populist rhetoric marches us blindfolded and in reverse, in pursuit of bogus enemies, fake victories and an imaginary past. A key principle becomes that of *escalation*. Ever harsher action must be taken against scapegoats, rhetoric must be dialled up, and above all the leader must have still more power.

This seeks to distract attention from the populist strongman's growing litany of failures. We reach a dizzying pinnacle of absurdity, where the leader's authority is total but their responsibility for problems is zero.

Leadership in organisations

This crisis and its economic effects coincide with the 50th anniversary of Milton Friedman's influential assertion that the social responsibility of business was only to increase its profits, within the law. The mantra that the primary purpose of companies is to maximise shareholder value, particularly in the short term, has gained a strong hold on much of business practice (Stout, 2012). It is in this context that business leaders will be responding to the effects of the economic lockdown that has been imposed on them.

Even before the lockdown, corporations were less concerned than ever with long-term relationships and self-interest had been increasingly at the fore of organisational behaviour (Davis, 2009). While some have suggested that we need to foreground the importance of purpose and meaning in leadership (e.g. Kempster et al., 2011; van Knippenberg, 2020) the reality is that the purpose of much business is solely to generate greater profits. And what are the consequences? Employment has been casualised to a previously unimaginable extent. A total of 2.8 million people in the UK held gig economy jobs in 2017. One in four of such workers earned less than £7.50 an hour (Lepanjuuri et al., 2018). It is these workers who are most vulnerable to the economic fallout from the coronavirus crisis.

Mainstream leadership theorising predominantly takes the rights of business leaders to pursue whatever purpose they have in mind entirely for granted. The job of leadership research is to develop theories that help them to do this in the most effective and efficient way possible. I don't think this approach ever had much to commend it, but it has even less going for it now. It is undeniable that hard choices lie ahead. But when these choices are guided primarily by the short-term interests of a few, then the disenchantment that already exists with business leaders will intensify. Feelings of 'relative deprivation' will grow, with destabilising consequences for all of society. The resultant cynicism is not reduced when billionaires such as Richard Branson respond to the crisis by asking for state support. So what forms of leadership should businesses now adopt?

In my view, this is the wrong question. It suggests that those who inhabit organisations are invariably committed to an overarching common purpose, and are bonded by the same set of unitarist interests. Of course, organisational actors share some interests and sense of purpose. If they didn't, organisation would be impossible, outside the land of slave plantations and concentration camps. But any sense of a common purpose exists alongside tensions between the immediate short-term interest of shareholder value and the long-term welfare of those that organisations employ and the customers that they serve. It is pointless to pretend otherwise. The actions of leaders will surely depend on how businesses are organised, how power within them is distributed, and on the views that exist about the primary importance of shareholder value – what can be called *the underlying theory of the business*.

These are early days. A number of large organisations in the US have pledged no layoffs this year, including Morgan Stanley and the Bank of America (Lennihan, 2020). Swinscoe (2020) gives other examples, including the following:

In the early part of March, Microsoft asked all of their Seattle employees who could work from home to do so. The reduction of personnel on their campuses reduced the need for many of the

hourly workers that support their campus operations. These include cafe workers, shuttle drivers and on-site tech and audio-visual support personnel among others. However, Microsoft committed to continue to pay the 4,500 hourly employees who work on their campuses their regular wages even if their work hours were reduced.

Microsoft, of course, has deep pockets. Others have already shown themselves to have deep pockets but short arms. Assume, also, that the main theory of business for many remains the primacy of shareholder value, and that they have fewer resources to fall back on than the examples just given. Transferring the costs of the crisis to labour rather than capital will seem an entirely rational response, and the sooner the better. In understanding the consequences of this, Belmi and Pfeffer (2015) draw attention to the importance of 'the norm of reciprocity'. Gouldner (1960: 171) stated that 'a norm of reciprocity... makes two interrelated... demands: (1) people should help those who have helped them, and (2) people should not injure those who have helped them'. The promotion of shareholder value as the primary, and often only, real purpose of business has activated this norm in a purely negative sense. People have already learned to reciprocate the uncaring and dismissive attitudes that they judge business leaders have shown to them. Actions now that are perceived as being primarily concerned with prioritising shareholder value at the expense of employees will intensify these attitudes.

They will also activate concerns for what Goethals (2018) calls 'procedural justice', where people believe that they are not getting what they think they deserve. There are few cries more raucous than 'It's not fair'. Such agitation further fuels the fires of populism. In a familiar spiral, where cause and effect turn into their opposites, populism creates a crisis for business leaders whose responses strengthen the divisive agenda of populist leaders. In turn, this leads to more economic woes (and so on), unless and until other forces intervene.

A more critical perspective is needed. One problem is that the strong man view of leadership which we find in populism also exists in business, fanned by conventional theorising and fawning tributes to celebrity CEOs in popular outlets such as *Harvard Business Review*. Critical leadership studies can problematise the concentration of power in the hands of business elites, challenge self-serving theories of the business that guide much leadership decision-making, and interrogate the organisational practices that many of them employ to silence dissent and pulverise opposition (Collinson, 2017).

This means that we should be willing to address big questions with uncertain answers more often than we normally do. Leadership scholars need to participate in the debates taking place about how businesses can be reconfigured to serve wider stakeholder needs, including those of long-term rather than short-term shareholders. Too much of our scholarship is hung up on playing with piddling variables as part of an introspective 'game' where publishing has become an end in itself (Tourish, 2020). The impact of most such papers is zilch. I think that the coronavirus crisis has created a practical and ethical imperative for us to do more work that matters.

Conclusion

John Gray (2020) writes as follows:

A sense of fragility is everywhere. It is not only society that feels shaky. So does the human position in the world. Viral images reveal human absence in different ways. Wild boars are

roaming in the towns of northern Italy, while in Lopburi in Thailand gangs of monkeys no longer fed by tourists are fighting in the streets. Inhuman beauty and a fierce struggle for life have sprung up in cities emptied by the virus.

Human institutions are under threat, and theories of leadership are being tested. What happens next? Yong (2020) sketches two possibilities. In one, populism – and Trumpism in particular – emerges vindicated. Re-elected in November 2020, President Trump pursues his isolationist agenda with ever greater fervour. International alliances are shredded, foreigners are even more demonised, and ‘foreign’ plagues become the new existential threat, one that requires more strongman leadership. But in another scenario:

A communal spirit, ironically born through social distancing, causes people to turn outward, to neighbors both foreign and domestic. The election of November 2020 becomes a repudiation of “America first” politics. The nation pivots, as it did after World War II, from isolationism to international cooperation. Buoyed by steady investments and an influx of the brightest minds, the health-care workforce surges. Gen C kids write school essays about growing up to be epidemiologists. Public health becomes the centerpiece of foreign policy.

Let us set aside the American centric nature of this vision. The choices that arise in America face countries around the world. It should be clear that there is nothing inevitable about either option. While there may be similarities between some of the processes now at play and what happened in the 1930s, the events of that disastrous decade and the war that it led to only seem inevitable in retrospect. There were always opportunities to change course. Hitler, in particular, depended more on the ineptitude of his opponents than on his own non-existent genius (Kershaw, 1998). Today, as then, the likelihood of best and worst case scenarios arising from the coronavirus crisis depends on how we deploy our own agency.

Key elements of Steven Pinker’s (2018) best-selling book *Enlightenment Now* have often been misrepresented. Occasional exaggerations aside, I do not see his book as a Panglossian text. While Pinker describes a world of steady progress – less hunger, greater wealth, reduced violence – he also acknowledges that we face major problems, particularly that of climate change. His argument is that many of the values that we think of as belonging to what we call the enlightenment are what we now need to solve them. These include a commitment to using reason, evidence, and science to discover truths about our world and advance its welfare. In total, these values are the opposite of populism, strong man leadership, and of despair manifesting as resignation. Progress is not inevitable. But the world remains to be shaped in ways that serve positive purposes, and that bring meaning and value to our lives.

I suggest that leadership scholars have much to offer here. We can analyse leadership dynamics, warn, and identify positive leadership where it exists. We can challenge old theories and help to develop new ones. We can help to illuminate what is, and what ought to be. This issue of our journal is a contribution to these important conversations.

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Notes

1. See www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/24/leaked-cabinet-office-briefing-on-uk-pandemic-threat-the-key-points (accessed 26 April 2020).
2. An example: In 2014, Nigel Farage, then leader of the UK Independence Party, blamed his failure to arrive in time for an event on 'a country in which the population is going through the roof, chiefly because of open-door immigration, and the fact the M4 is not as navigable as it used to be.' (<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/dec/07/nigel-farage-blames-immigration-m4-traffic-ukip-reception>)

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